

Towards the Decolonization of Social Thought in Latin America: The Ways of Ibn Khaldun*

Latin Amerika’da Sosyal Düşüncenin Dekolonizasyonuna Doğru: İbn Haldun Yöntemleri

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The (writing of history) requires numerous sources and much varied knowledge. It also requires a good speculative mind and thoroughness, which lead the historian to the truth and keep him from slips and errors. If he trusts historical information in its plain transmitted form and has no clear knowledge of the principles resulting from custom, the fundamental facts of politics, the nature of civilization, or the conditions governing human social organization, and if, furthermore, he does not evaluate remote or ancient material through comparison with near or contemporary material, he often cannot avoid stumbling and slipping and deviating from the path of truth

Ibn Khaldun, Al Muqaddimah

Abstract: Six centuries have passed since the death of the great Andalusian thinker Ibn Khaldun, in his time one of the brightest and most universal minds, who gave us considerable insights in all the fields of social thought. In these times we must look for alternative thought patterns that allow us to explain and achieve proposals that may face the decay of regimes based on the abuse of power, violence, spendthrift and inequality, which threaten to destroy the social foundations of life on earth. This is our concern and in this paper we will try to reconsider some of Ibn Khaldun’s ideas in order to formulate alternatives that are both theoretically sound and socially efficient to rebuild our understanding of the social dynamics, and to contribute to the recovery of the dignity, solidarity, justice and austerity that can make collective life a viable foundation for the world that will arise from the present crisis.

Keywords: Ibn Khaldun, Social Thought, Latin America

Öz: Ölümünün üzerinden 6 yüz yıl geçen, zamanının en parlak ve evrensel düşünürü olan Endülüslü düşünür İbn Haldun bize sosyal düşüncenin tüm alanlarında çok derin bakış açıları sunmuştur. Günümüzde sosyal yaşantının temellerini sarsan, iktidarlar tarafından gücün istismarı,

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şiddet, israf, adaletsizlik gibi konulara alternatif bakış açıları getirecek yaklaşımlara ihtiyacımız vardır. Bu yazının amcacıda teorik olarak güçlü ve sosyal olarak etkili olabilecek sosyal dinamikleri yeniden yapılandırarak ve onurlu, güçlü, ve adaletli bir birlikteliği geliştirebilecek ve günümüz krizlerine çözüm getirebilecek olan Ibn Haldun'un fikirlerini gözden geçirmektir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Ibn Haldun, Sosyal Düşünce, Latin Amerika*

Six centuries have passed since the death of the great Andalusian thinker Ibn Khaldun, in his time one of the brightest and most universal minds, who gave us considerable insights in all the fields of social thought. He particularly helped to clarify in his own original way the conditions needed to build a social thought that embraces all human interests (history, geography, nutrition, believes, power relationships, territorial interests, mobility) in the explanation of all forms of social continuity, coherence and organization.

In order to overcome the dominant system of thought, according to which life on earth depends on the economic power and initiative of a few individuals, a thorough study of Al Muqaddimah not only has proved to be helpful but also absolutely necessary. In these times we must look for alternative thought patterns that allow us to explain and achieve proposals that may face the decay of regimes based on the abuse of power, violence, spendthrift and inequality, which threaten to destroy the social foundations of life on earth.

This is our concern and in this paper we will try to reconsider some of Ibn Khaldun's ideas in order to formulate alternatives that are both theoretically sound and socially efficient to rebuild our understanding of the social dynamics, and to contribute to the recovery of the dignity, solidarity, justice and austerity that can make collective life a viable foundation for the world that will arise from the present crisis.

Histories of the world: Occidentalism and universalism

One of the fundamental problems of colonized societies is that they must learn to free themselves of the vision imposed by their conquerors; they must learn to see themselves in eyes different from those of their conquerors. It was assumed that the social structure of these colonized societies was petrified in backwardness, in

barbarianism. It was this argument that served the conquerors to justify the use of force in imposing changes, as well as the resulting oppression.

At present, neocolonial structures determine different modes of vassalage, equally oriented to favor the projects, necessities and perspectives of those who hold power. In Latin America, while societies were built by the Spanish monarchy upon the destruction and denial of their pre-Columbian roots, contemporary societies face an economic, cultural and military dominion of the financial and commercial markets, that pretends the disintegration of all collective action. Societies, that were brought to submission by brutal exercise of military and religious violence and who were denied any sign of identity, survived during three centuries after the resistance of the original peoples, but were forced to adopt the strategy of submerging and hiding from their oppressors; keeping secret their beliefs, their customs, their culture. Constant and obligatory contact with the society formed by the conquerors forced to them to imitate hitherto unknown habits, to adapt to the newly created institutions, to protect themselves from the prejudices and intolerance of those who had overcome them. And, it is from fear of the subjugation of which they were victims, or by conviction, that part of the conquered society forgot, – as generally happens to conquered peoples, as indicated by Ibn Khaldun –, their roots, their culture, their communitarian bonds.

The political independence from Spain, attained during the nineteenth century, gave way to new forms of economic and social dependency. Commercial and financial relations were from then on determined by England, France and later, the United States. The behavior adopted by those who represented the new forms of oppression repeated the old scheme of the Spanish domination: a denial of the identity of the original peoples, an explanation of reality based on the acceptance of the imposed models.

Just like religion was used centuries ago as an instrument to justify the hegemony of the Iberian powers in the American continent, at present, a significant part of social sciences have become instruments of the new forms of domination. Fundamental to understand the ways in which social sciences are used is the Eurocentric version of History and its account of Universal History. It is almost exclusively concerned with the modern and contemporary trajectory of European countries and, in the best of cases, it extends to the countries of the present North Atlantic community. The contributions of

other peoples are completely marginalized, in spite of their once important role in universal development, because they are now considered to have remained outside the main current of universal events. The tale's center is the western consolidation, first, and then its expansion to the peripheral countries. This account is exclusive, because the history of peoples outside the said North Atlantic community, is recognized only as an obstacle to the expanding western interests.

The countries situated at the brink of this account, underwent a marginalization process consisting of several elements: In a geographic aspect, the center of development was moved from the Mediterranean basin, to the Atlantic basin. In a perspective of cultural and historical marginalization, Asian, Middle Eastern and North African countries –the cradle of civilization–, were considered in a decay that returned them to the origin of times. The American peoples were condemned to live permanently in the dawn of the civilization or to assume their role of surpassed students forced to repeat the same stages the developed countries suffered. In other words, Universal History is made up, on the one hand, of the tale of disconnection of the Asian and African millenarian civilizations from European History; and, on the other hand, of the exclusion or, rather, the forceful inclusion of the native peoples of the America.

There are two main features of this western, civilizing, hegemonic account. The first is the idea of the loss of vigor of the millenarian civilizations which would prove their belonging to the past and an actual lifeless existence; this means that the countries under the North Atlantic domination, should reconstruct their history from their presumed incorporation into the system imposed by the conquest. The second characteristic is the self assigned role of western civilization, as eradicator of a past of ignorance, fanaticism and superstition, in benefit of a future of modernity, equality and homogeneity based on forcing this Eurocentric vision into becoming a universal view.

According to the western epic, an incredible turn of global dimensions took place when thanks to the development of the western countries, the peripheral countries were incorporated into history as peoples in rags, once called, peoples without history. The vicious circle is closed when the peoples of the periphery adopt this version as theirs and study their own history through the deforming prism of the western scholars. Due

to their not belonging to this North Atlantic geographic scope, the Arab and Persian cultures, to mention just two examples, are seen as episodes that have not accomplished the height granted to the civilization that began to bloom only half a millenium ago. Other episodes, if at all, are studied as live forms of a remote past, which have survived because of their distance to the revitalizing contact of the present civilizing mainstream.

This exercise in Western History, abusively denominated Universal History, has had a false comparative character: on the one hand, the Asian, Middle Eastern and African civilizations, lost in decay; and on the other hand, the western type of civilization, that, through the idea of progress, presumes to have escaped the cyclical history of birth, apogee and decay.

Western civilization, as it is evident nowadays, refuses to consider that its successive crises can be interpreted as announcements of decay. This is impeded by its own idea of development and progress and the pretension that its particular values are authentically universal and, to a great extent timeless. It assumes that the hegemony it exerts does not have limits and that, unlike preceding civilizations, whose accomplishments are narrated in past, for which they were and represented; the account of its own success will always be in present time.

In the narration of Western civilization, it is considered that the challenges presented by other cultures, are animated by a spirit representing a past experience and not a future promise, since this is an exclusive right for the West.

In the Western particularistic tale with universal pretensions, those who have defied its proposals are considered emissaries of the past, who do not understand the advantages offered by western civilization. Zapata, Villa, just to mention two examples from the beginning of the twentieth century, were seen as bandits, predators who, in spite of being contemporaries, were in fact bygone; they were, so to speak reminiscences of the past.

Universal history thus understood is, in fact, a tale of edges, not only geographic, but epistemological; in stead of History, it is Anthropology that studies them; if they do

not fit in History, peoples are known as illiterate, primitive. It was when the “academic revolution” occurred, that is when the hegemonic speech was transferred from Europe to the United States, with the categories of delay and underdevelopment, of feudality and modernity, it was analysed how the peoples, by denial non-European, were to be integrated into the “universal” vision.

The history of countries that do not belong to the nucleus of the Atlantic community is considered an abortion; an experience that, according to the West, has “failed”. Without the dynamic ingredient represented by the economic actors, that is, without the characteristic element of the western civilization, the history of the peripheral countries has been interpreted in some cases as a failed experience, in others as an unfinished narration. This history is a puzzle that cannot be completed, because it refers to societies that have only commenced to be profiled and are already condemned to remain unfinished; suspended in time. In other words, their history, lacking the bourgeoisie element, is absurd.

In the narration of development, the role assigned to backwardness and marginalization, both phenomena that do not belong to contemporary history, is fundamental. The dominant vision in social sciences parts from the perspective that these phenomena are not linked with the present of developed societies, but rather belong to their past, as well as to the present of the peripheral societies. The link between delay and development, however, is not to be resolved by means of the analysis of successive stages, but can only be understood when facing the problem why these archaic forms, theoretically condemned to disappear, survive in modern structures. One of these forms, that of social solidarity, corresponds a to the *Asabiya*, that Ibn Khaldun considered to be the driving force behind the expansion of the nomadic peoples of North Africa.

The group feeling, *Asabiya*, as the driving force of History

Whenever we observe people who possess group feeling and who have gained control over many lands and nations, we find in them an eager desire for goodness and good qualities, such as generosity, the forgiveness of error, tolerance toward the weak, hospitality toward guests, the support of dependants, maintenance of the indigents, patience in adverse circumstances, faithful fulfillment of obligations, liberality with money for the preservation of honour, respect for the religious law

and for the scholars who are learned in it, observation of the things to be done or not to be done that those scholars prescribe for them, thinking highly of religious scholarship, belief in and veneration for men of religion and a desire to receive their prayers, great respect for old men and teachers, acceptance of the truth in response to those who call to it, fairness to and care for those who are too weak to take care of themselves, humility toward the poor, attentiveness to the complaints of the supplicants, fulfillment of the duties of the religious law and divine worship in all details, avoidance of fraud, cunning, deceit, and shirking of obligations, and similar things.

The discourse of contemporary History and Social Sciences is based on a scheme, according to which, the force of modernity will erase the organizations that preceded the present political and economic organization. Metaphorically speaking, the river of present development will be in charge of incorporating the affluents of the past and give them a unique sense. In this discourse, nevertheless, a dark veil leaves us without explanation of how the autonomous history of the past is recovered by those who, unsatisfied with the place assigned to them in present society, look for the restoration of the autonomy of those societies.

Ibn Khaldun, while recognizing in history the actual differences among societies, denies the existence of an exclusive, determinist, univocal point of view. His studies allow him to analyze the peculiarities of each society based on its geographical context, on the habits of its members, and mainly, on the development of its labour force and its collective cohesion, to which he assigns a greater weight in the survival of the society. In a strict sense, his search parts from the bottom and from there travels upwards and even though he gets to analyze the behavior of the dominant sectors, he gives more significance to the horizontality of social relations, *Asabiya*, source and origin of the social life.

Khaldun's recognition of nomadic and sedentary societies, and of the spiritual force of societies that evolve in the poorest material conditions, is inspiring for those who, like us, recognize in our history and at the present time that the fundamental strength of our divided societies lies indeed in those groups that live excluded from the supposed benefits of the so called western civilization, but are united in the search of a better life for all.

Observing our societies in the light and logic of their own ways of survival, their strategies to face exclusion and inequality, seeking to ensure collective achievement of health, instruction, work and security, is a powerful stimulus to question the individualistic, consumerist and entrepreneurial vision with which, in the last two centuries, conquering powers have wanted to overwhelm us.

Asabiya is, in the vision of Ibn Khaldun, the cohesion force that allows societies to build a stable organization to secure their survival, as well as their defense from external aggressions. The group feeling is formed as part of a complex web of relationships in which the reproduction of life, the work division and the use of geographic, strategic and material resources are the basis that defines the viability of a certain collectivity.

The idea of solidarity, understood not as a feeling exclusive to backwardness, but as a present survival strategy, precedes the formation of the State nations that proposed fraternity as an equivalent of the former solidarity. Today solidarity is alive and operating, present in social organizations and expressed by means of actions that the supposed fraternity cannot animate. Fraternity only has sense among the members of the same State nation. However, the group feeling is not limited to operating within the boundaries of the national society, but outside them as well, as was proved by the Movement of Solidarity of the Asian, African and Latin American Peoples in the decade of the sixties of the last century, and as is acquired by multiple forms today, in the knowledge and solidarity expressed by social, intellectual and cultural organizations as opposed to the excluding perspective of the prevailing Occidentalism/universalism.

The idea of fraternity served to express the contradictions of a world divided in nations. These handled a double code, that of fraternity and equality only within the frontiers of the State nations, and, a different one, that of the hierarchy and inequality, as applied to the countries of the periphery. Against this background how can we expect that the colonization code, which established a clear distinction between friend and foe, would be abandoned by the countries dominated by the West, and accepted as valid by those who had been their victims? How to accept that the only equality actually practiced, the one of the market, would work, while political inequality –as evidenced in the agendas of the transitions to democracy–, would continue to be a feasible goal?

Asabiya, Society and the State

Royal authority is an institution that is natural to mankind. We have explained before that human beings cannot live and exist except through social organization and cooperation for the purpose of obtaining their food and other necessities of life. When they have organized, necessity requires that they deal with each other and satisfy their needs. Each one will stretch out his hand for whatever he needs and (try simply to) take it, since injustice and aggressiveness are in the animal nature. The others, in turn, will try to prevent him from taking it, motivated by wrathfulness and spite and the strong human reaction when one's own property is menaced. This causes dissension, which leads to hostilities, and hostilities lead to trouble and bloodshed, and loss of life, which lead to the destruction of the species. Now, (the human species) is one of the things the Creator has especially (enjoined us) to preserve.

People, thus, cannot persist in a state of anarchy and without a ruler who keeps them apart. Therefore, they need a person to restrain them. He is their ruler. As is required by human nature, he must be a forceful ruler, one who exercises authority. In this connection, group feeling is absolutely necessary, for as we have stated before, aggressive and defensive enterprises can succeed only with the help of group feeling. As one can see, royal authority of this kind is a noble institution, toward which all claims are directed, and one that needs to be defended. Nothing of this sort can materialize except with the help of group feeling, as has been mentioned before.

Ibn Khaldun, *Al Muqaddimah*

Asabiya, as a principle equal to those of freedom and fraternity, which started to operate with the birth of State nations in the West, does not have a national entity as frame of reference, but it includes those groups whose entailment obeys to the principle of agnation, opposite to cognation, that is, kinship by maternal line. Solidarity is not related to this type of psychological, cultural experience; neither does it correspond to the political experiences of the clientelism, nor to those of the corporate spirit. It responds, on the contrary, to a different social organization that distrusts the role played by the State. It is a principle of civil character, non-sanguineous, that served to emphasize the virtues that turned the nomadic peoples into masters of the world.

Asabiya operates like a principle of identity, fraternity, equality, beyond the individual and the egotism that characterizes him. Asabiya is the impulse of free human beings, the spring that moves those who fulfill the obligation that spontaneously arises from being solidary with their group when it faces other groups.

Asabiya, the solidarity of which Ibn Khaldun speaks, is based on the identity of the group with pre-state values, that can only receive aid from themselves, and that do not view their governors as protectors, but as allies of the enemies. Present solidarity is based on the experience of groups that perceive the State as an instrument to maintain the persistence of the marginalization and exploitation phenomena. In societies with strong colonial roots, like the Mexican or the Bolivian one, fear of the State does not correspond to the fear of the Anglo-Saxon Leviathan, but rather, it is fear of the strange State, part of a domination instrument. The oppressor State, because it is colonial, because it is unequal, because it is an instrument that perpetuates the friend or foe relationship.

The vision offered by Ibn Khaldun about the birth and the development of the peoples of North Africa, is built upon the solidarity, mutual aid, trust and the conviction that each one would see his own luck in the luck of the others, and would act consequently. Asabiya, is called the spirit of unity or freedom among us. Under other names it is in the fundamentals of the peoples that were once marginal and later on became the owners of their own destiny. Asabiya is a group identity feeling different from the once so-called internationalism. Asabiya operated in the decades of the sixties and seventies of the past century as the substantial element of the Movements of National Liberation, structured as solidary movements of liberation. Asabiya is present in the contemporary struggles for resistance and liberation from the oppression of marauder capitalism.

Nevertheless, it is most important that all society formed out of essential bonds is in a condition to recognize an authority that represents it and with which it can express the collective identity. Thus, according to Ibn Khaldun, it is society who creates and grants faculties of authority. And it is this same society who, in the course of time, testifies the inevitable loss of this fundamental bond, the society's consequent decay and who presides the search of a new authority.

Ibn Khaldun's vision helps us to make a new route through the history of our countries and to find the moments in which the collective spirit has presided over the transformation of our societies, as much as the way in which it has survived after the imposition of authorities distant to the accomplishment of the needs of the majority, and it continues in the search for authorities that express its identity, its values, its beliefs, its principles.

Asabiya is the foundation of the continuity of societies broken by the oppression of conquerors and groups of power imposed throughout the history of Latin America. It is a force that is communicated within societies sharing bonds beyond the borders imposed by States and foreign powers. It is the utopia that unites the struggles of Hidalgo, Morelos, Bolivar, Artigas, Juarez and Martí, in the nineteenth century; and of Villa, Zapata, Mariátegui, Sandino, Farabundo Martí, Cárdenas, Fidel Castro and Salvador Allende, in the twentieth century.

Each one of the histories presided by these extraordinary men has the mark of a collective formation, the exemplary experience of an organization formed to face the oppressors, but also to delineate new forms of authority that ensure the dignity, justice and freedom of our peoples. It is possible and it will be extremely useful to recognize the paths taken by these generations of fighters to discover the elements that conform the true Latin American identity, so that we can move away from external patterns and from perspectives that overshadow the sense of this collective multi-centennial achievement in our subcontinent. Asabiya is the force present in multiple contemporary experiences in our region. Practically in all Latin America, the questioning of powers governed by ambition and force, with contempt toward their peoples, has harnessed the resistance with the creativity and will needed to constitute new forms of State and government, to find new perspectives in social representation and, mainly, it has given rise to development of a collective utopia in which the communities will take the responsibility for decisions about the destiny of their countries and the whole region.

This powerful concept is tremendously inspiring to understand, for example, how the Venezuelan people faced the military and economic power of the class that had controlled the political and economic life in the country until the takeover of Hugo

Chavez. At the 2001 coup d'état, the group feeling constituted a powerful driving force to recover the government as a legitimate mandate, and it was this same spirit that has determined the rate of important economic and social reforms from then on to the present time. The Venezuelan Constitution recognizes today the fundamental nature of the communal councils, territorial nuclei of power that decide on as determining matters as education, health, food supply, and housing. An extraordinary experience altogether, the Bolivarian University, accompanies this process by developing projects and training programs, based on the problems posed by these councils. They furnish the directions of teaching and research, but also feed with their creativity the process of knowledge of the University students.

Another form of Asabiya is found in Bolivian communitarian assemblies, also recognized as a political authority by the recently approved Bolivian Constitution. In a country where 60% of the population claims to be indigenous, there is a generalized conviction that the only way to surpass predator capitalism is the collectivization of power. Bolivian communitarism has taught us many lessons, starting with the so called Water war, in 2000, when the organized population faced the attempts to transnationalize; followed by the overthrow of the government of Sanchez de Lozada, in 2003; and by the consequent rising of the Movement Towards Socialism (Movimiento al Socialismo, MAS) of Evo Morales, but mainly, Asabiya is strongly felt in each one of the political decisions, economic policies and cultural proposals of Bolivia at this very moment.

The list of collective experiences in Latin America is a long one, in which we cannot fail to mention those of our own country, Mexico, where in the southern part of the territory, the government performed by Juntas de buen gobierno (Gatherings of good government), and the Caracoles (Snails), constitute original organizational forms in order to transform the political task under the motto of To command by obeying. An experience promising to be equally significant is the one started by the municipal committees of the Legitimate Government of Mexico, an organization that has risen from the protests against the electoral fraud in 2006, and which has formed nuclei of the pacific civil resistance in defense of the rights of the people, the national patrimony, and the transformation of the public life of Mexico.

The decay of the empire and what will come later

Then, when the dynasty starts to become senile, as the result of the dissolution of group feeling and the disappearance of the tribe that founded it, the ruler needs supporters and helpers, because there are then many seceders, rivals, and rebels, and there is the fear of destruction. His revenues then go to his allies and supporters, military men who have their own group feelings. He spends his treasures and revenues on attempts to restore (the power of) the dynasty. Moreover, the revenue from taxes decreases, because there are many allowances to be paid and expenditure to be made. The revenues from the land tax decrease. The dynasty's need for money becomes more urgent. The intimates, the doorkeepers, and the secretaries no longer live under the shadow of prosperity and luxury, as their positions lose importance and the authority of the ruler shrinks.

The ruler's need for money at this time becomes even more urgent. The new generation within his inner circle and entourage spend the money with which their fathers had enriched themselves, for a purpose for which it was not intended, namely, that of helping the ruler. They begin to be no longer as sincerely loyal as their fathers and ancestors had been. The ruler, in turn, becomes of the opinion that he is more entitled than they to the wealth that was acquired during the reign of his predecessors and with the help of their position. He takes it and appropriates it for himself, gradually and according to their ranks. Thus the dynasty makes itself unpopular with them. It loses its entourage and great personalities and its rich and wealthy intimates. A great part of the edifice of glory crumbles, after having been supported and built up to a great height for those who shared in it.

Ibn Khaldun, *Al Muqaddimah*

Ibn Khaldun accurately indicates the characteristics of the decay of a dynasty that has lost contact with the people and threatens with its armed power for the conservation of its privileges. The abuses of authorities turned illegitimate are as hateful as inevitable, says Ibn Khaldun, but nothing can revert the crises and the fate of a dynasty once it has been smudged with corruption, avarice, fraud and looting of public resources.

The substitution of one dynasty – as he calls the group in power – is directly related with the level of civilization, luxury, waste, ostentation and excessive consumption, that are characteristic of the last stages of its existence. The crisis is not, nevertheless, a mere effect of the fact that human labour in the cities produces more than is needed for the society, but is rather the result of the distance assumed by the government in regard

to the needs and aspirations of the people. It is the collectivity that gives way to the overthrow of a declining power whose ambition, individual enrichment, and excesses have completely replaced the values that predominate when the group feeling is strong.

Ibn Khaldun's descriptions of the crisis of dynasties may well be applied to the history of dictatorships and corrupt power in our region, over and over again. They are also pertinent to explain not only the reasons and characteristics of the present capitalist crisis, but to consider inevitable the disappearance of the system that has given rise to individualism, consumption and wastefulness. Thus, it is extremely important that we think not only about the course of the crisis that will lead to the decay and substitution of a power system, but also about the ways in which society, reinforced in its group feeling, is able to generate new thought, a new form of social organization and to choose authorities that express the urgent necessity to establish new norms of collective organization and a balance based on the right distribution of the wealth.

Maybe time is short to imagine and moreover, to take full notice of the events that indicate the decay of a system in which everything can be bought, sold or destroyed. We should rather use our capacity of reflection to sustain the principles that will be useful to found new civilizations, cradled in equality, fairness, justice, tolerance and, mainly, the preservation of identity and group feeling of human collectivities in whose hands lays the power to save peace and to restore dignity of life on our planet. The President of Bolivia, Evo Morales, is right, when he affirms that, definitively, that task cannot be trusted to the International Monetary Fund.